

## Biographies

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Running Head: INCREASED INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION  
AUDITS

**Title:**

Communication Audits and the Effects of Increased Information: A Follow-up  
Study

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**Title:**

Communication Audits and the Effects of Increased Information: A Follow-up Study

**Abstract**

Communication audits have now featured in the literature for 50 years, and many audit approaches have been evaluated. However, follow-up studies designed to chart the actual impact that an audit makes upon communication performance have not been reported. Rather, audits are typically presented as one-shot events, whose impact is not measured. It is as if the audit is an end in itself rather than part of a process of measurement and performance improvement. This paper is therefore timely, since it employs a follow-up audit to track the effects of an initial audit upon a major health care organization. The findings do not support the view that the frequently expressed desire of staff for greater communication is a metamyth, and that an increased flow of information simply produces a demand for more. Rather, and consistent with the precepts of Uncertainty Reduction Theory, the provision of information reduced uncertainty and generated increased satisfaction with communication processes. The results from this study also illustrate how the audit can play a useful role in an organization's communication strategy.

## Title:

### **Communication Audits and the Effects of Increased Information: A**

#### **Follow-up Study**

Effective communication is central to business success, and as such should form an integral part of the strategic planning process for all organizations. Where organisational communication is poor the outcomes tend to be, inter alia, lower staff commitment, reduced production, greater absenteeism, increased industrial unrest, and higher turnover (Hargie, Dickson & Tourish, 1999). It follows that communication systems and practices must be carefully designed, implemented and evaluated (Barker & Camarata, 1998). The first step in developing a coherent communication strategy is to ascertain the state of an organization's communicative health. It is necessary to discover fundamental themes in current practice, and then develop, articulate and achieve strategic goals for the future (Clampitt, DeKoch & Cashman, 2000). Above all, managers need to know how well their communication systems are currently functioning. Some accountability is needed for the flow of organizational communication. At the practical level, this means that if vital information is not reaching its target audiences, then the blockages in the communication channels need to be identified and dealt with (Tourish & Hargie, 1996).

Systems must therefore be put in place to chart the organization's communicative functioning. Communication audits have been the key means of achieving this. The term emerged in the general academic literature in the early

1950s (Odiorne, 1954), and its use has frequently been urged on business, public relations and human resources practitioners (e.g. Campbell, 1982; Kopec, 1982; Stanton, 1981; Strenski, 1984). Its role has also been stressed in not for profit organizations (Lauer, 1996), and as an important ingredient of strategic marketing in the healthcare sector (Hargie & Tourish, 1996). Its value as a pedagogic instrument in the teaching of management communication has been asserted (Conaway, 1994; Shelby and Reinsch, 1996; Scott et al., 1999a), while communication audits have been recognised as a valuable ingredient of employee audits in general (Jennings et al., 1990), and in corporate assessment overall (Furnham and Gunter, 1993). Part of the role of audits has been to assess what has been defined as communication climate. This is generally conceived as relating to supportiveness (between managers and their staff); participative decision making; trust, confidence and credibility, openness and candor; and high performance goals (e.g. the extent to which performance goals are clearly communicated to those charged with their achievement) (Goldhaber, 1993). Audits can be utilized to explore the nature of communication climate, and its impact on wider organizational functioning.

The International Communication Association devoted considerable attention to the issue of communication audits during the 1970s (Goldhaber and Krivonos, 1977), while the issue also attracted the attention of a number of prominent communication scholars (e.g. Greenbaum and White, 1976). A seminal text was published from the work of the ICA towards the end of the decade (Goldhaber and Rogers, 1979). However, while several audit studies were reported in the 1980s, relatively few were published in the 1990s. Indeed,

in this era Ellis et al. (1993, p.143) noted that the general literature on the topic was 'sparse.' There are many reasons for this, and a variety of attitudinal and structural obstacles to the wider utilisation of audits have been identified (see Tourish, 1997). The result of these barriers is that communication audits are an example of a useful approach to research that has been unjustly neglected (Smeltzer, 1993).

What would seem to be the case is that audits have entered the mainstream of the life of many organisations, where surveys are carried out as a matter of course but not reported in the literature. Furthermore, the audit approach is widely taught to students of organizational communication (Zorn, 2002). The new millennium seems to have witnessed something of a resurgence of interest in this field. A recent audit text, which contains case studies across a wide range of organisations, has been published (Hargie and Tourish, 2000). Likewise, a special forum in *Management Communication Quarterly* (Vol. 15, 2002) has evaluated the audit's relevance to the changing organisational world, including the introduction of more interpretative and iterative approaches to audits as recommended by theorists such as Jones (2002), Meyer (2002) and Salem (2002).

However, there has been relatively little published material on the use of follow-up audits to track the effects of the initial assessment. Furthermore, where audits have been reported in the literature, these still present the findings from one-shot events with no documented follow-up (e.g. Scott et al., 1999b). In what appears to be the only study in this area, Brooks et al. (1979) carried out

follow-up research on 16 organizations that had been audited using the ICA Communication Audit. However, this investigation involved a questionnaire survey of how satisfied these organizations were with the ICA Audit and what impact it had upon operational issues, but did not include follow-up audits. It was, in essence, an evaluation of how managers felt about a single audit in each organization. The main finding from this study was that, “Without reservation, the audit resulted in perceived favorable changes in communication effectiveness” (Brooks et al., 1979, p. 135). But this is one step removed from a follow-up audit, since the workforce was not involved in the evaluation. This was recognised by Brooks et al. themselves, who highlighted the need for more “ ‘before/after’ effectiveness designs in field studies to specifically measure the impact of the audit on communication and organizational effectiveness” (p. 136). Their exhortation seems to have fallen on deaf ears, and the absence of follow-up audit studies in the literature is particularly striking. It is a gap that we set out to address in this paper.

### **Key Communication Audit Issues**

The concept of metamyth has been proposed to suggest that certain shared beliefs come to be established, usually about what is good or worthwhile, and then tend to be used as a justification and a guide for organisational action (Ingersoll and Adams, 1986, 1992; Adams and Ingersoll, 1990). The metamyth (e.g. that technology helps solve all problems) often becomes part of an organisation’s microculture where it forms a tacit understanding that goes unchallenged, yet underlies organisational life.

Zimmerman et al. (1996) proposed that a communication metamyth underlies much thinking about organisational communication and strategy. In essence, it is argued that no matter how much information people receive they will invariably continue to report that they want more. Yet the metamyth is that by providing more information these needs will diminish or disappear. As these authors noted, communication assessments have almost always found “a general desire for more communication, particularly in face-to-face interaction and from sources such as ‘top management’ and immediate supervisors...organization members viewed more communication as the way to resolve most every problem or to enrich their work life” (Zimmerman et al., 1996, p.189). One interpretation of this approach is that variations in reported levels of satisfaction with communication climate should remain consistently negative, and even deteriorate, with people tending to request ever more information whatever managers do. On the other hand, it is possible that specific attempts to improve communication could impact positively on perceptions of communication climate, thus leading to improved satisfaction. Such findings would suggest that audit measurements are identifying aspects of communication climate that are subject to change, including change in a positive direction induced by management attention to the issue. This would run counter to the notion that the desire for more information is insatiable, and therefore a metamyth. It is therefore important to determine whether the frequently perceived need for more information is indeed a communication metamyth rather than a process that is amenable to management action. Thus, the first research objective of this study was:



*RO1. To explore the extent to which staff perceptions of communication change across time, in either positive or negative directions, within a sample organization and in response to particular communication initiatives.*

The steps required to improve communication climate often look simple on paper (Arnott, 1987), while suggestions about what constitutes a world class communication system also often make use of basic and easily understood communication principles (Clampitt and Berk, 2000). However, management researchers have increasingly reported a disabling gap between the theory of management on the one hand and its practice on the other (e.g. Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000), even when the managers concerned know and approve of the theory in question – what has been termed a ‘knowing-doing gap.’ As we noted above, managers are also often resistant to evaluating communication processes, and subsequently to changing their own behavior. This is in spite of, or perhaps because of, the apparent simplicity underlying many effective communication programmes. Inertia is a major factor in organisational life, and not just for those on the shop floor. It was therefore possible that basic audit recommendations would remain on the shelf, rather than be enacted in practice – a ‘knowing-doing’ gap in communication. As such, our second objective was:

*RO2. To examine the extent to which changes in management communication practice within an organization can be realistically implemented and regularly evaluated.*

A third issue is that, in principle, all changes could be equally destructive, or at least irrelevant to reported levels of communication dissatisfaction. The literature increasingly suggests that people feel over-bombarded with change, and thus frequently respond to new change initiatives with an instinctive mood of suspicion, leading to rejection (Furnham, 1997). There are many initiatives that can look attractive on paper, such as empowerment, but which often evoke opposition by their mode of implementation (Argyris, 1998). Again, this relates to the notion of the need for more information as a communication metamyth. For example, it could be that when staff demand more information they are simply raising the issue as a proxy for their general resentment of management. Providing more information may not address their underlying concern. Alternatively, the removal of one general focus of resentment around which everyone can rally ('Managers never tell us anything') might threaten a cherished organisational myth, and evoke reflexive ridicule on that basis alone ('Look at the CEO's new initiative. More window dressing!'). Our third objective was therefore:

*RO3. To ascertain whether the particular management interventions that result from a typical audit have a positive or negative impact upon communication climate.*

## **Methodology**

### The Organizational Context

The organization within which the audits reported in this paper were conducted was a large, geographically dispersed body within the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK, responsible for multiple areas of provision. It had been designated as one of the new NHS 'Trusts' after the first audit was completed, a change in name dictated by central government that also signified enhanced operational autonomy. The NHS is generally recognised as a particularly difficult area to manage, given its size, complexity, staff mix, the volume of demand, rising public expectations about quality, and restricted public funding (Harrison, Hunter & Pollitt 1990). It was selected for this study as an area especially likely to showcase the wide range of communication problems, opportunities and challenges identified in the general organizational communication literature.

The organization concerned provides health and social services across eight main programme areas: family and child care, elderly, mental health, learning disability, physical and sensory disability, health promotion and disease prevention, primary care, and adult community. The scale of operation is reflected by the fact that the Trust spans a geographical area of 1,149 miles, covering both urban and rural areas. It provides social and health care services for 320,00 people, and home-based care for 8,000 people per day. There is a network of 90 different health and social care facilities, such as care homes for the elderly, centers for adults with learning disabilities, residential childcare units, and a major psychiatric hospital. Overall, staff are involved in some 700,000 communications per year with clients. The total annual budget is

£100million (\$140million), with a staffing complement of 4,000 people. This encompasses the full range of health and social care professionals (consultants, doctors, nurses, occupational therapists, speech therapists, social workers, etc.), together with related clerical, administrative, secretarial, technical estates, and ancillary staff. The organization also has 800 hourly-paid employees (termed ‘home helps’) who provide assistance to the elderly<sup>1</sup>.

### Securing Management and Staff Participation

A key first step in the audit process is securing the support of senior management (Hargie and Tourish, 2000). We are, however, well aware of what we term the ‘auditor’s paradox’. As summarized by Boyle (2000, p. 145), in terms of auditing, “You couldn’t do it without the co-operation of the company, but if you co-operate can you be objective?” We think the answer to this question is a qualified ‘yes’. Inevitably, some compromises have to be made, but auditors must be as objective as possible.

Following initial discussions between the audit team and the Trust’s Chief Executive and Head of Communications, a series of working meetings was held with the Communications team to formulate the most appropriate methods for implementing the audit. Given the widely spread geographical nature of the Trust and the variety of staff groups involved, it was eventually decided that a depth Questionnaire would gauge the most detailed information. A Communications Seminar was then run by the auditors for the entire Senior Management Team (SMT), to explain the aims, nature, functions and

methodology of the audit. This was followed by a workshop session (again, with the SMT) to identify the key strategic issues that confronted the Trust, about which it should be maintaining high levels of information flow. The issues identified included how new government proposals would impact upon the organization; the effects of the NHS internal market in relation to the business planning process, the marketing of services to other bodies, and the development of new services; the organizational structure especially in relation to corporate identity and the problems faced by the spread of services across a wide geographic area. Those in attendance included the Chief Executive, and senior executives responsible for human resources, finance and other core corporate functions. The workshop examined:

- The role of communications in delivering improved organizational effectiveness
- The nature of a communication strategy, how it would benefit the organization, and core attributes of world class communication systems
- The practical implications of implementing an audit, and likely responses from core organizational players, such as trade unions and medical staff
- The key communication challenges and issues facing this particular organization (The final list of identified key communication challenges and issues were then included within the Questionnaire).

This general approach is consistent with the overall view in the literature, to the effect that change initiatives need to begin at the top and be

sustained by support from that level, if they are to be effective (Deetz et al., 2000). Thus, the seminar and workshop allowed all members of the SMT to be kept fully apprised of the audit and to help shape its final form. This was important not only because such involvement serves to increase commitment, but also because these managers would be directly involved in arranging the release of staff to complete the audit Questionnaire. Subsequently, a letter from the Chief Executive was sent to all staff. This outlined the purpose of the audit from the organization's perspective (to improve communications), explained what would be involved, delineated the commitment required of audit participants, emphasized the random nature of participant selection, stressed the confidential nature of the exercise and outlined the time scale envisaged. The organization initially only made a commitment to the first audit. However, as a result of the findings from the first audit and the conviction of senior managers that this had proved to be a useful exercise, some 18 months after the implementation of the initial audit an agreement was reached that a follow-up audit should be carried out. The second audit was then implemented two years after the initial one.

### Selecting an Audit Instrument

The instrument employed in this audit was an adaptation of the ICA Questionnaire, which has been shown to have validity, reliability and utility (Clampitt, 2000). It produces a wealth of quantitative data that act as benchmarks against which to measure future performance. It also generates qualitative data in the form of responses to open questions. In most sections of

the Questionnaire there are two columns, along which staff rate, firstly, the present or 'actual' level communication, and secondly, how much communication they feel there should ideally be. The difference between these two scores then allows for comparisons to be made between actual and ideal communication levels. Lower difference score are usually more positive, and indeed a score of '0' represents a position where communication is at optimum level. The original ICA Questionnaire was modified, following audits conducted in a range of NHS sectors (Tourish & Hargie, 1998). Four main changes were made:

- The terminology was modified to reflect the NHS sector. For example, the term 'middle management' was used rather than 'immediate supervisor'.
- An open-format question was placed right at the start of the Questionnaire. This requests respondents to cite three strengths and three weaknesses in the way other staff communicate with them. This encourages respondents to reflect in their own terms about how they feel, before being 'led' in any way by the forced-choice questions that follow.
- The original ICA instrument had a 'critical incident' sheet alongside every page. In general, people viewed the task of completing these as being excessive. While retaining the concept, we reduced the labor by asking respondents to provide details of one critical incident that was most typical of communication within the organization.
- A final question asked respondents simply to recommend three changes that would improve communication.

In addition, a sample of 500 cases from a number of other audits, conducted prior to the one reported in this paper, was analysed to determine the internal reliability of the items within each section of the revised Questionnaire and also to ascertain the degree of relevance of each item to the overall theme as represented by the section topic. The Questionnaire concerned is reproduced in Appendix One of *The Handbook of Communication Audits for Organisations*, (Hargie and Tourish, 2000). Internal reliability scores for each section were consistently high, with an overall Cronbach's alpha value = 0.84. In addition, the Questionnaire has a section devoted to what are considered to be the main issues facing the organization at the particular time of audit. In the present audit some of these issues remained the same from Audit1 to Audit2 ('Development of new services'), while others changed (e.g. Audit1 'Transition to Trust status': Audit2 'New Government plans for changing the services').

### The Sample

This audit necessitated selecting a sample population that was representative of all sub-groups as the basis for data collection. In both audits, a weighted stratified sampling technique was employed, based on that devised in previous audits by Hargie & Tourish (1993). Using this sampling frame, a random, stratified, cross-section of full-time and part-time staff was then selected. The sample was stratified across staff groups (i.e. professional & technical, medical & dental, nursing & midwifery, social work, administration, maintenance, ancillary & general), and was also weighted to reflect gender (80%F: 20%M) and managerial level. Given that a random sampling approach



was adopted on both occasions, to provide sufficient respondents to be representative of the general category in which they belonged, the two audit samples did not comprise the same set of employees. A further reason for this approach is that some of the staff groups (e.g. nurses) could be expected to have a reasonable turnover rate during the two-year period in which this investigation was conducted. A repeated measures design over the whole period of the investigation would therefore have been impossible. However, the same sampling frame was applied during both investigations.

#### Administering the Instrument

To maximise the response rate, for both audits selected staff were given an hour off work and requested to assemble on a given date and time in a large room at one of the seven main regional sub-centres of the Trust. The audit Questionnaires were then distributed in person by the authors. This method of administration allowed the auditors to personally explain how staff were selected, give assurances about confidentiality, emphasise our independence from the Trust, and answer in detail any queries about the audit or about specific items in the Questionnaire. Attendance lists were taken and respondents were reassured that this was simply so that any absent staff could be followed up by a postal Questionnaire. Thus, within one week of the Questionnaire completion sessions, notices were sent to those selected for participation who had failed to turn up, enclosing copies of the Questionnaire and requesting that they be completed. Further follow up notices were sent two weeks later.

Identical procedures were followed during both audits. The final totals for staff audited represented 4% of staff (excluding home helps) in both instances. Given the total staff complement (approximately 4000 – in an organization such as this, the precise number can fluctuate from week to week), the final number was more than sufficient to qualify as a representative number of people in each of the main occupational categories, to permit meaningful analysis. In addition, it should be noted that the percentage of respondents selected for participation who eventually completed questionnaires was over 70% on both occasions. Even when given time off work, some employees will choose not to participate in the audit process, some will be ill, and so on. Most response rates in the literature range between 35% to 80% (Edwards et al., 1997), while it has been suggested that response rates of 50% or over is adequate, a rate of 60% is good and a rate of 70% or more is very good (Babbie, 1973). As Goldhaber (2002) noted, response rates to traditional audits are often less than 20%. He has shown that web-based audits using e-mail produce response rates range from 60-75%, so our response rate was at the higher end of audit returns, and is consistent with the finding that follow-up is crucial to maximize effectiveness.

## **Results**

The Questionnaire utilized in this study includes a total of 77 separate items measured using 5-point Likert scales. These items are divided into sections, each of which deals with a different ‘category’ of communication (e.g. ‘Information Sent’). The items within each section are then summed to give

overall scores for that particular category. A further summation of all of the category scores then yields an overall score for each respondent. These can be viewed as ‘satisfaction’ scores, in that shortfalls between the ‘actual’ and ‘ideal’ columns represents unhappiness with current levels of communication. All summated scores are in turn transformed into a scale comparable with the item scales, so that all measures are presented within a scale from 1 to 5. Percentage scores are also formulated. These are computed by multiplying the Likert 5-point scale value by 20 and expressing this value as a percentage. This technique has also been applied to mean scores. Thus, a mean value of 2 yields 40% ‘satisfaction’ whereas a mean value of 2.8 corresponds to 56% ‘satisfaction’.

#### Audit1 – Audit2 Comparisons

A general comparison between audits, based on overall satisfaction scores, was performed using a number of variables (type of employment, length of service, time in current post, extent of communication training received, type of employment, age and gender). The data were initially examined using a 2-way ANOVA model based on audit stage (Audit1, Audit2) and each variable, in turn, as the main effects. Summary statistics are presented in Table 1. The overall improvement in satisfaction from Audit1 to Audit2 is evident, as indicated by the 'between audits' effect. In relation to the variables, it can be seen that ‘communication training’ was the only one to yield a statistically significant result. An analysis of means revealed that those who had received ‘some’ or ‘a lot’ of training in communication skills had higher satisfaction scores than those who had received either ‘little’ or ‘no’ training.

Table 1 about here

Further detailed analysis was undertaken to ascertain why particular variables yielded significant results, again using the ANOVA model, but now inspecting each audit in turn for differences within the same set of variables, using 1-way models. The main findings are summarised in Table 2. In Audits 1 and 2 the amount of communication training received was significant; a confirmation of the earlier finding. As mentioned earlier, an analysis of means showed that this result was due to those in receipt of ‘some’ or ‘a lot’ of training expressing greater overall satisfaction than those who had received ‘little’ or ‘no’ training. Interestingly, training had not been focused upon in the action plan following Audit1.

Table 2 about here

In Table 3 a summary of mean satisfaction scores is presented for each category of communication. The consistent increase in means for the 'actual' component of each category between audits is evident. Furthermore, the reduction in the ‘difference’ scores indicates an improvement in staff satisfaction between audits.

### Information Received

Given the scale of the Questionnaire, it is not possible here to report each result. Rather, we will focus upon ‘information received’, and the significant

findings therein are presented in Table 4. This category relates most directly to the notion propounded by Zimmerman et al. (1996) that the frequently expressed desire for more information is a communication metamyth. As a result of the finding in Audit1 that staff expressed a significant need for more information, two of our recommendations were that:

- More information should be disseminated about all aspects of the work of the Trust, especially key current management concerns.
- There should be more face-to-face communication between senior managers and staff.

In line with these recommendations, a series of steps was taken by the Trust. Firstly, the Newsletter was revamped and sent to all staff at their home address. The results of both audits were given prominence in this organ, together with details about the communications strategy that would be implemented to overcome identified problems. A monthly letter from the Chief Executive was also sent to all staff, again at their home address. This provided a summary of current information about the organization and key decisions taken by the Trust Board. Feedback was encouraged from staff on this letter, and a point of contact clearly itemised. Thirdly, the Chief Executive put in place a rota of regular visits to all sub-regions. Meetings were held with staff, where current strategies were explicated, and this was followed by open question-and-answer sessions. As part of this policy, important senior management meetings also rotated around the regions (previously these had always been held at HQ). This action plan seems

to have been successful, with significant improvement scores for the amount of information received (see Table 4).

Table 4 about here

In particular, staff scores for information received about ‘the development of the organization as a single, coherent Trust’ showed a dramatic increase. At the time of Audit1, there was considerable staff concern about organizational changes. Management efforts to disseminate information about where the Trust was going seem to have paid dividends. There were improved scores for ‘organizational goals’, ‘decisions affecting my job’ and ‘service developments/ improvements’. In terms of information received from various sources, again the picture was one of overall improved performance (Table 4). The most striking result here was the score for ‘senior management’, a further indication that the steps already reported had been successful.

The third section for information received in the Questionnaire relates to channels. Here again the news was good, with an overall increase in ‘satisfaction’. There was a significantly improved score for internal publications (Table 4). Following Audit1, we made suggestions as to how these could be improved. The significant improvement between the audits indicates that steps taken here were successful.

The final element of information received measured by the Questionnaire is that of timeliness (Table 4). The greatest improvement was in

relation to the Newsletter. One of the problems identified in Audit1 had been delays in getting the Newsletter published. Steps were taken to expedite production, and these seem to have produced positive results. The other major improvement was an increase in the timeliness of information from senior managers, again reflecting trends throughout the audits.

### Comparison of Difference Scores

Audit1-Audit2 improvements were found across all areas of the Questionnaire (Table 5). Differences were calculated between how people perceived communication to be at present on various dimensions (e.g. how much information they actually received on various topics) compared to what they thought communication should be (e.g. how much information they wanted to receive on various topics). The overall difference in mean scores in Audit 1 was 1.19 and was 0.88 in Audit Two. The difference between these two scores, and hence between audits, of 0.31 represents a 6.2% increase in ‘satisfaction’ with communications. It was worthy of note that results associated with ‘information sent’ indicated significance at lower levels than reported elsewhere. Thus, although there was also a slightly narrower gap between how much information people sent and how much they thought they should send in Audit 2 as compared to Audit 1, the improvement here was less marked than for other dimensions of communication.

Table 5 about here

### Communication examples

One of the open questions on the Questionnaire is a “critical incident” format, where respondents are asked to select and provide details of one actual incident, either positive or negative, that for them best represents communications within the Trust. A content analysis of these incidents revealed a marked increase in reporting of positive as opposed to negative examples. At Audit1 the negative/positive balance of reported incidents was 5:1 (19 positive and 96 negative examples), but by Audit2 there were actually more positive examples (n=63) than negative examples (n=61) reported. This supported the general trend of substantive improvements in communication, and when the results were tested, using the Chi-squared statistic, a very highly significant value was obtained (Chi-squared value of 21.4, df=1, prob.=0.000). One interesting feature of the reported examples was that two-thirds of all positive examples concerned interactions with immediate managers, demonstrating the pivotal role they play within organizations. It also suggests that a focus on the behaviors of these key change agents may be the most effective means of achieving rapid improvements in communication climate.

### Open Questions

Three other open sections were included in the Questionnaire. These requested respondents to provide examples of three main communication strengths, three main weaknesses, and three suggestions for improvement in communications. In general the responses confirmed the direction of findings



from the rest of the audit. Thus, the two main changes in cited strengths from Audit1 to Audit2 were the Chief Executive's direct communications and the Newsletter, both of which were introduced following Audit1. The other main reported strength was the good working relationships with colleagues and line managers. In terms of weaknesses, in Audit1 the most recurring one was the lack of information from senior managers. However, in Audit2 this did not emerge as a weakness.

## **Conclusions**

The audit findings can best be discussed in relation to the research objectives originally set. Thus:

1. *To explore the extent to which staff perceptions of communication change across time, in either positive or negative directions, within a sample organization and in response to particular communication initiatives.*

This study does not support the position of Zimmerman et al. (1996). We found that the provision of more information did not lead to employees wanting ever-greater amounts. In fact, the difference between the amount of information staff received and the amount they desired decreased from Audit1 to Audit2 (see Table 3). The net effect of increased information provision was to improve satisfaction with the overall communication climate. One interesting finding in relation to channels of communication, was that ratings of satisfaction with

information flow from the organization's Chief Executive improved from Audit1 to Audit2.

This can be understood in terms of uncertainty reduction theory (Berger, 1987). People have both predictive and explanatory needs about the future – i.e. they need to be able to predict what is going to happen next, and explain why that is so. Thus, 'uncertainty reduction is a vital concern for the conduct of almost any communicative transaction' (Berger, 1986, p.35). As uncertainty increases, information needs are heightened (Sias and Wyers, 2001). Researchers have also identified a link between reducing uncertainty and increasing trust (DiFonzo & Bordia, 1998). It has been suggested that employees request more information during job transitions, and that greater communication leads to positive adjustment to such changes, through reduced stress and role ambiguity (Kramer, 1994). Thus, low levels of information flow from managers are likely to increase uncertainty, produce more reliance on the grapevine and create a communication climate characterised by rumours (Karathanos and Auriemmo, 1999). High uncertainty is a stimulus for information seeking behaviors (Kellerman and Reynolds, 1990). Our data indicate that increased information flow seems to reduce uncertainty (as identified by the gap between the information received and what employees say they need). This also appears to reduce their perception that they need more information. These findings confirm the importance of uncertainty being managed (Bradac, 2001). In general, our results support the tenets of uncertainty reduction theory, and may offer practitioners the reassurance that paying

attention to communication needs in the form of increasing information flow is likely to pay positive dividends.

*2. To examine the extent to which changes in management communication practice within an organization can be realistically implemented and regularly evaluated.*

Measures designed to improve communication are frequently characterized by their simplicity. In particular, research suggests that the most powerful effects are to be obtained from attempts to improve face-to-face communication or what has been defined as ‘the human moment’ (Hallowell, 1999) for staff and managers. In general, the preferred source of information for most people remains their direct supervisor (Curley, 2000). Our findings are consistent with this thrust. Moreover, it appears from this study that the straightforward focus on improving communication as a result of Audit1 may be well within the competence and commitment of an organization’s senior managers. The very straightforwardness of the initiatives undertaken suggests that a key to avoiding a ‘knowing-doing’ gap in communication may be to focus on the simple. The data support the view that for sources of information such as the Chief Executive, who cannot typically interact directly with every employee, an imaginative use of the print and other media yields dividends. The results also underscore the argument that for organizational effectiveness, staff must feel a valued part of a core organizational team (Procter and Mueller, 2000). More broadly, it is increasingly clear that effectively communicating an organization’s strategy is at the heart of achieving high performance (see

contributors to Cushman and King, 2001). The use of audits to measure the effects of information provision would appear to be a useful means of sharpening an organisation's communication strategy, and ensuring that it is tailored to overall business needs.

The role of regular evaluation is also of interest. The findings from Audit1 alerted the senior management team to the communication problems that it faced. It is likely that these would have gone unnoticed in the busy world of this organization. In this way, audits serve a consciousness raising purpose for senior managers, and act as an energizing agent in terms of their strategies, which further helps them overcome the 'knowing-doing' gap in communication.

*3. To ascertain whether the particular management interventions that result from a typical audit have a positive or negative impact upon communication climate.*

In the aftermath of Audit 1 a variety of recommendations, discussed above, were proposed and implemented. The results suggest that they improved the communication climate, as indicated by the second audit. The recommendations were based on several key themes in the literature, and the resultant improvements can be viewed as some confirmation of these themes. Firstly, it would appear that communication climate is to a large extent determined by the behaviors of the top management team, and the range of symbolic behaviors they engage in which highlight their commitment to open communication (e.g. Young and Post, 1993; Arnold, 1993). Secondly, the wider

literature on building sustainable high involvement work practices suggests that multiple interventions, closely aligned in terms of values and integrated in their execution, are necessary to improve organizational efficiency (e.g. Pfeffer, 1998).

An emerging voluminous case study literature dealing with the contribution of people management issues to organizational effectiveness repeatedly highlights the quality of communication as a core binding ingredient in the most effective organizations (e.g. O'Reilly and Pfeffer, 2000). These suggest that improvements in communication climate are more likely to result from multiple, linked changes rather than isolated initiatives. Furthermore, improvements in such areas as organizational commitment or satisfaction with communication are more likely to be global rather than specific. In other words, the general literature would lead us to suspect that if satisfaction with an aspect of communication (e.g. information flow) increases, then this would extend to an improvement in satisfaction levels with the overall communication climate. This interpretation is consistent with the data in this paper, which identifies specific measures to improve face-to-face communication and the profile of the SMT as communicators, linked to a global improvement in communication over the period of the study.

Again, this illustrates the importance of regular audits in guiding management practice. Without a follow up Audit, it would not have been possible to determine the impact of various time-consuming communication initiatives. Audits are also clearly useful as a research tool, enabling researchers

to identify measures that have greater or lesser effect. On a more general note, the data suggest that measures that improve face-to-face communication appear to answer fundamental needs in the workplace, and hence translate rapidly into improvements in communication climate. By exploring questions such as these, regular audits can be an important asset to theory building.

A further finding reported here was that those with higher levels of training in communication skills also had higher reported levels of satisfaction with communication. It may be that such training improves people's sensitivity to the overall communication climate, and in particular to both the constraints on management on this issue, and their own communicative responsibilities. However, there are many possible explanations for this finding, and further research is clearly required. If this relationship between training and satisfaction were confirmed in other studies, it would have clear ramifications for organizational communication.

### **Implications, Study Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

As we highlighted earlier, communication audits have not often been used on an ongoing basis. This paper found that audits can help to illuminate the relationship between key variables, such as uncertainty and trust; and that they facilitate an exploration of the impact of particular management initiatives, on an ongoing basis.

Most centrally, our study questions the assumption that providing more information as a means of improving the communication climate is a communication metamyth. As Zimmerman et al. (1996, p.194) themselves noted, their own data looking at five organizations with a total of 659 respondents ‘revealed significant differences among the organizations, both in terms of how much information members received and how much they wanted to receive from several sources and channels.’ It may well be that people tend to report a gap between how much information they receive and how much they wish - and this pattern occurs in our own data as well, in both Audits. In practical terms, this supports initiatives aimed at improving information flow. In theoretical terms, it suggests that the key tenets of uncertainty reduction theory are useful in illuminating patterns of organizational communication. The concept that the need for more information is a metamyth may therefore be little more than the observation that, whatever the phenomenon under investigation, at least some gap always persists between reality and perfection. We see little in this to justify the nomenclature of a metamyth, an approach which may invite the fatalistic presumption that since whatever we do fails to yield results, we might as well do nothing at all. The evidence here suggests that even if providing more information does not eliminate all imperfections in perceived levels of information need, it at least reduces them. The consequent reduction in uncertainty, while never absolute, is still likely to have knock-on effects in terms of organizational relationships.

There are, however, a number of limitations to this study. Firstly, it was restricted to one organization. Neither was it a ‘clean’ experimental

investigation. Real world studies of organizations rarely are. However, within the limits of providing a service desired by the organization, we attempted to ensure compatibility across both audits. We also recognize the possibility that some of the improvements in communication climate identified here could have resulted from changes in the organization's operating environment, rather than as a result of the audit process per se or the interventions to which they gave rise. Further cross-sectional as well as longitudinal studies are required, to resolve such issues. In addition, the use of audits over a longer time frame would be useful in terms of addressing issues such as whether greater information provision is or is not a communication metamyth.

Overall, we echo the view that while the value of audits is widely recognised by organizations, they remain an under-utilised focus for research (Scott et al. 1999a). They could usefully be more widely employed by communications researchers. Both the theory and practice of communication management will benefit as a result.



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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> These home helps were excluded from the main audits as the issues addressed therein were not so relevant to them. Instead, a separate, shorter Questionnaire was used to audit these staff. While there were marked improvements in perceived communications with this staff group, space does not permit a detailed analysis in this paper.

Table 1: Audit1 vs Audit 2 Comparisons

	<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Probability</i>
<i>Type of Employment</i>				
'between audits'	3.19	1	12.85	0.000
'blue collar/professional'	0.35	2	0.70	0.498
<i>Length of Service</i>				
'between audits'	2.75	1	10.94	0.001
<10/>10 years	0.49	2	0.97	0.381
<i>Time in current Post</i>				
'between audits'	2.85	1	11.37	0.001
<10/>10 years	0.003	2	0.001	0.994
<i>Communication Training</i>				
'between audits'	2.892	1	12.07	0.001
'Little' or 'none'/'some' or 'a lot'	2.806	1	11.71	0.001
<i>Type of Employment</i>				
'between audits'	1.570	1	6.31	0.013
full-time/other	0.007	1	0.27	0.605
<i>Age category</i>				
'between audits'	3.155	1	12.84	0.000
<40/>40	1.248	2	2.54	0.081
<i>Gender</i>				
'between audits'	2.075	1	8.33	0.004
male/female	0.624	1	2.50	0.115

Table 2: Audit1 and Audit 2 Internal Comparisons

		<i><b>Sum of Squares</b></i>	<i><b>df</b></i>	<i><b>F</b></i>	<i><b>Probability</b></i>
<i>Type of Employment</i>					
	Audit1	0.946	2	2.07	0.130
	Audit2	0.189	2	0.35	0.705
<i>Length of Service</i>					
	Audit1	0.515	2	0.97	0.381
	Audit2	0.459	2	0.96	0.384
<i>Time in current Post</i>					
	Audit1	0.120	2	0.25	0.776
	Audit2	0.425	2	0.79	0.455
<i>Communication Training</i>					
	Audit1	0.824	1	3.59	0.060
	Audit2	2.106	1	8.40	0.004
<i>Type of Employment</i>					
	Audit1	0.510	1	2.20	0.141
	Audit2	0.190	1	0.71	0.401
<i>Age category</i>					
	Audit1	0.680	2	1.46	0.232
	Audit2	1.237	2	2.37	0.098
<i>Gender</i>					
	Audit1	0.244	1	1.04	0.309
	Audit2	0.384	1	1.45	0.232

Table 3: Mean satisfaction Scores for each Category

Category	Audit 1			Audit 2		
	Actual	Desired	Difference	Actual	Desired	Difference
Information received	2.43	3.94	1.51	2.77	3.85	1.09
Information received through various sources	2.83	3.84	1.01	3.05	3.83	0.78
Information received through various channels	2.52	3.39	0.87	2.75	3.44	0.69
Action taken on information sent	2.93	3.81	0.88	3.09	3.79	0.71
Information received on important issues	2.11	4.11	2.00	2.50	3.86	1.36
Information sent on important issues	1.88	2.76	0.88	1.92	2.58	0.65
Overall satisfaction	2.45	3.64	1.19	2.68	3.56	0.88

Table 4: Information Received from Audit1-Audit2 (summary statistics)

<b>Category</b>	<b>Test statistic (Student's t)</b>	<b>Degrees of freedom</b>	<b>probability</b>
Information received	3.801	231	0.000
• <i>Development of organization</i>	5.781	232	0.000
• <i>Organizational goals</i>	3.147	238	0.002
• <i>Decisions affecting my job</i>	3.250	238	0.001
• <i>Service development/improvement</i>	4.409	244	0.000
Information received from various sources	2.783	239	0.006
• <i>Senior managers</i>	4.917	231	0.000
Information received from various channels	2.763	230	0.007
• <i>Internal publications</i>	5.644	235	0.000
Timeliness of information received	2.930	240	0.004
• <i>Staff newsletter</i>	7.798	229	0.000
• <i>Senior managers</i>	3.328	244	0.001

Table 5: Comparison of Difference Scores for Main Questionnaire Areas

<b>Category</b>	<b>Audit1</b>	<b>Audit2</b>	<b>t-statistic</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Prob.</b>
Information received	1.51	1.09	4.030	232	0.000
Information received on important issues	2.00	1.36	5.113	236	0.000
Information received through various sources	1.01	0.78	2.654	245	0.008
Information received through various channels	0.87	0.69	2.044	242	0.042
Action taken on information sent	0.88	0.71	1.834	243	0.068
Information sent on important issues	0.88	0.65	1.911	246	0.057
Overall change between audits	1.19	0.88	4.072	242	0.000